



Mikael Levin

COMMON PLACES

Cultural Identity
in the Urban Environment

Katrineholm

Cambrai

Erfurt

Thessaloniki

The Untidy Intimacy of Places

by Christopher Phillips

Exhibition Schedule

Insitut Français de Thessalonique
In Conjunction with PhotoSynkyria 99
Thessaloniki, Greece
February 16 - March 15, 1999

Änglen, Katrineholms Konsthall
Katrineholm, Sweden
June 14 - August 14, 1999

Centre Régional de la Photographie
Douchy-les Mines, France
October, 1999

Galerie am Fishmarkt - Konsthalle Erfurt
Erfurt, Germany
2000

“The house of memory”—this is how the architect Aldo Rossi once described the Western city. Rossi’s striking phrase prompts us to recall the ways that the forms and structures of our built environment, as they slowly accumulate over time, come to provide a guarantee of a living connection between past and future generations. Seen in this light, the city can be imagined as a space whose true function is to enable individual and collective memory to coexist. In our century, however, the cultural value of memory has been increasingly challenged; as times change and circumstances shift, the contending claims of the past, present and future are being constantly renegotiated.

These are some of the considerations that underlie Mikael Levin’s photographic project “Common Places,” which takes as its subject a relatively unheralded aspect of urban Europe: its towns and smaller cities. In four locales ranging from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean—Katrineholm (Sweden), Erfurt (Germany), Cambrai (France) and Thessaloniki (Greece)—Levin introduces us to a distinctive urban culture marked by a singular array of pleasures and tensions. The pleasures spring first from the preservation of a human-scale architecture that avoids the typical big-city imbalance between the human body and the massive built environment; then from the survival of a casual street life that encourages pedestrians to linger in public spaces, fostering an air of easy face-to-face encounter; and finally from a sense of coexistence with, not detachment from, surrounding nature. The tensions arise from the pressure to create a sustainable local identity in a Europe that is growing both increasingly unified and culturally homogenized. In “Common Places” we are presented with four distinctive yet not untypical communities, each responding in its own fashion to the challenge of creating a shared sense of place. Through the photographs of Mikael Levin we gain a new insight into seemingly unremarkable urban spaces, which we learn to recognize as the setting for a quiet battle that pits the relentless forces of the present against the stubborn traces of the historical past.

“Common Places” extends, in an unexpected direction, the concerns of Mikael Levin’s previous projects, which have frequently explored the dialectic of rootedness and exile. After landscape photographs carried out largely in France, Sweden and Israel during the 1980s, his “Border Project” of 1993-95 encompassed several interrelated bodies of work. One consisted of laconic studies of the now-abandoned border stations found along the boundaries of the French hexagon; these architectural structures, which once symbolized a whole national ethos of belonging and exclusion, have now become obsolete with the dismantling of internal borders within the European Union. Another presented rather anonymous-looking photographs of people moving confusedly through the terminals at Orly airport in Paris—a crucial transit point for arriving immigrants—and a third comprised portraits made in Sweden of war refugees who had fled the Balkan conflicts.

In his next project, “War Story” (1995-96), Levin retraced the path that took his father, an American war correspondent, through the battlefields and concentration camps of France, Germany and Czechoslovakia at the close of World War II. Alongside text panels bearing excerpts from his father’s writings, Levin showed his own quiet, observant contemporary photographs, often made at the same sites. From their juxtaposition emerges an overlay of historical moments, one that prompts the viewer to search for subtle traces of the past in the apparently banal scenes of the present. Subsequently, in a 1998 project tellingly titled “The Burden of Identity,” Levin carried out a series of portraits of the contemporary Jews of Berlin—men and women who are slowly rebuilding a community all but extinguished during the Third Reich. These portraits gain part of their intensity from the fact that they were made at a variety of different sites in a city whose urban fabric is now being irrevocably transformed.

It is possible to discover a cluster of related themes in Levin’s earlier projects. These include the fragility of human communities; the ways that inhabited spaces preserve or conceal traces of the past; and the difficulty, during an era of violent flux such as ours, of understanding who one is and where one comes from. From such concerns arose the questions that led Levin to conceive “Common Places.” He writes, “When I was photographing ‘War Story,’ especially in the cities, I was noticing how the impact of the war was often expressed more in the absence of things than anything else.” As a result, he says, “I now wanted to try to work with more subtle traces, to show how everyday scenes in themselves express memory and identity.”

“Common Places” acquired a specific shape in response to Levin’s growing interest in a certain kind of urban European community, that found not in the great metropolises but in towns and smaller cities. His aim, he says, was not to carry out an exhaustive documentation of the four places he selected, or even to convey a rounded portrait of each. Instead he set out to suggest, through a carefully edited group of eight photographs of each locale, both the “typical” qualities they share and the particular features that set them apart.

Funding and technical support for this project where provided by Institut Français de Thessalonique, Thuringian Ministry for Science and Cultural Affairs, Centre Régional de la Photographie, and Katrineholms Konsthall.

Special thanks to Jacques Soulillou, Kai Uwe Scheirtz, Pierre Devin, and Siv Falk. I would also like to thank Thomas Nicq, Christophe Bavier and Aurora Hendricks.

Design by Linda Florio

Levin approached “Common Places” not analytically, as an urban sociologist might, but intuitively, as a visual artist. As the project developed, he hit upon ways to make visually manifest the correspondences he sensed between the four locales. Working primarily around the central urban district in each city, he looked primarily for “everyday” sites: the kinds of places that a local resident might regularly pass along a personal promenade. At the same time, Levin purposely avoided recognized landmarks (“postcard views” of Katrineholm are represented in the exhibition by the actual postcards he collected). Searching for settings that suggest what Aldo Rossi has called “the untidy intimacy of places,” he concentrated on the kinds of scenes that furnish the familiar, unremarked backdrop of a community’s collective life.

In deciding upon his camera viewpoints, Levin chose to keep to a middle distance, avoiding both extreme long views as well as close-ups of individual details. He sought to register in each image as much mundane information as possible—for example, the varieties of clothing worn by people in the streets—knowing that such particulars, while of scant importance today, often become a source of fascination with the passage of time. To retain a sense of the specific atmosphere and quality of light in each locale, he varied his printing method slightly for each group of prints. And, to encourage the viewer to become visually immersed in the scenes that he presents, he decided to make the prints in a comparatively large format.

In the end Levin chose to concentrate on four places that he had encountered more or less by accident during his travels in recent years. Katrineholm is a town of around 21,000 people that lies just over 100 kilometers southwest of Stockholm. Cambrai, a modest city of roughly 175,000, is situated in northern France, not far from Lille. Erfurt is located in central Germany, approximately 100 kilometers southwest of Leipzig, and counts around 220,000 inhabitants. Thessaloniki, a port bordering the waters of the Aegean, is the principal city of northern Greece, with a population of around one million. In addition to their variations of size and geographical location, these four urban sites also differ significantly—and here is perhaps the real key to Levin’s project—in the ways that the past impinges on the consciousness of present-day inhabitants.

Katrineholm is a town whose roots do not go deep. Although 6,000 years ago a Stone Age hunting and farming culture existed in this area, Katrineholm is a new town, a garden city officially founded in 1917. It is located in a predominantly farming region that is also home to light manufacturing operations and high-tech companies. Above all there is an attempt here, characteristic of the turn-of-the-century garden-city movement, to achieve a balance between economic and environmental concerns, between work and leisure activities. Yet despite its seeming isolation, this is also a town in which foreigners have grown to be a familiar presence, a result of the Swedish government’s policy of directing to Katrineholm many immigrants—Vietnamese, Kurds, Cambodians, Africans—who have come in search of temporary work or political asylum. Focused almost entirely on the present, Katrineholm has only lately begun to preserve “historic” buildings erected at the turn of the century. Recently, too, the downtown streets have been paved with cobblestones—which never existed before. It is as if a sense of tradition is something that must be artificially cultivated or be imported from elsewhere.

Levin’s photographs evoke a town that still seems rather precariously cleared from the surrounding countryside. In one photograph green nature looms in the distance past a row of houses, and in another we see low, wild shrubbery unobtrusively edging past the outer boundaries of a parking lot. Katrineholm’s solidly constructed buildings are rather nondescript; their unblemished, unornamented facades lend them the air of oversized architectural models. This flawless quality renders almost shocking the one instance of graffiti that we see. Street lights and traffic signs are anonymously modern; and only the sprinkling of satellite TV dishes on rooftops speaks of a direct connection to the outside world. This is a town which, undistracted by relics of former triumphs or tragedies, seems determined to hold on to its stasis.

The past intrudes more forcefully on Cambrai, but it seems to offer few unambiguous messages to the city’s contemporary inhabitants. Once the capital of a Roman province, Cambrai flourished during the Middle Ages as a commercial city on the trade routes linking England, Flanders and Champagne. Like much of northern France, Cambrai was devastated during World War I (the first modern tank battle was fought nearby), and the city was deliberately rebuilt on the lines of the original street plan. A handful of architectural monuments have survived from the 16th-18th centuries, but these are of insufficient grandeur to turn the city into a tourist destination. As is the case throughout this region, Cambrai’s once-vital textile and manufacturing industries have fallen on hard times, and it is too early to predict the outcome of current efforts to forge new economic partnerships with neighboring areas in Belgium, Holland and Germany.

Levin shows a small city of modest, comfortable aspect, whose three- and four-story buildings are fronted by unassuming facades of brick, stone and stucco. Within Cambrai’s almost seamless blend of architectural styles, the more distinctive structures, such as the 16th-century Maison Espagnole and the restored Hotel de Ville, do not stand out dramatically from the prevailing urban mix. They are jostled by their neighbors—more recent, anonymous buildings whose roofs bristle with TV antennae—and by the ubiquitous parked autos which seem to crowd every sidewalk. Levin’s photographs present striking evidence of the congestion that threatens many

European urban centers, whose narrow, winding streets, fundamentally unaltered in plan since the Middle Ages, were never meant to handle high-volume auto traffic. A moment of visual relief, at any rate, is provided by a long perspectival view that looks past a vista of residential blocks toward a reassuring terminus—a stand of trees that appears to signal the boundaries the old city.

Erfurt, too, has inherited a classic, concentric city plan, but it has dealt with the problem of circulation by turning the old city center into a pedestrian zone—one aspect of an effort to parlay Erfurt’s rich medieval heritage into a major touristic attraction. For centuries a prosperous trading town, Erfurt boasts a collection of splendid Gothic, Baroque and Rococo buildings as well as the university where Martin Luther studied. The expansive cathedral square, the Domplatz, is ringed by historic houses with half-timber facades; from it fans out a network of narrow streets. The survival of the old city owes more to luck than foresight. Erfurt escaped the Allied aerial bombing of World War II relatively unscathed; subsequently, during the 50 years of the socialist German Democratic Republic, little renovation was attempted, and new building activity was confined to the satellite zones beyond the old city.

In his photographs of Erfurt, Levin presents us with only indirect glimpses of the restored Domplatz, as when we catch sight of soaring steeples through the trees of quiet residential streets. The new construction undertaken since 1990 seems for the most part tastefully done, with even the modern apartment buildings blending in more or less harmoniously. Yet the 20th century cannot be held fully at bay: consider the evidence of a graffiti sprayer’s recent visit on the ground-floor walls of an imposing building with rusticated timbering.

Whether consciously intended or not, the restoration of medieval Erfurt as a kind of Disneyesque fantasy has the effect of throwing into obscurity the more doubtful aspects of the city’s past. During the Third Reich, for example, Erfurt was home to one of Germany’s largest military garrisons and witnessed the wholesale deportation of the city’s Jewish population; its factories manufactured the gas ovens that were put to deadly use at Nazi extermination camps. Reminders of Erfurt’s half-century of socialist rule seem no more likely to survive. In addition to his photographs of the central city, Levin visited the monolithic residential high-rises built during the socialist era. These buildings once stood as symbols of an alternative vision of the future—a vision that, now discredited, is being erased from Erfurt’s collective memory. While still maintained, the 10-story slabs are filled largely today with the families of aging, unemployed workers who have proved unable to find a place in the new free-market economy.

In contrast to Erfurt’s selective memory, Thessaloniki offers an example of a modern urban environment built on the wholesale repudiation of the historical past. Founded more than 20 centuries ago, Thessaloniki flourished under the Romans and became the second city of Byzantine empire. Conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1430, it remained under Ottoman rule until taken by Greek forces in 1912. Only five years later, in August 1917, a devastating fire swept through the city, destroying virtually all of the old urban center. Thessaloniki’s political leaders seized the opportunity to totally recast the city plan; in so doing, the architectural heritage of Rome and Byzantium was highlighted and the memory of the Ottoman period was expunged. A French architect was commissioned to draw up a modern grid of streets cut by diagonal thoroughfares, and the old city dwelling pattern, based on the existence of distinct ethnic quarters (Greek, Jewish, Muslim) gave way to new neighborhoods based on economic stratification.

Of the four locales that Levin photographed for “Common Places,” Thessaloniki marks the point where a sense of modern big-city life enters the scene. We see wide boulevards flanked by recent 8-story residential buildings that overwhelm the remnants of Byzantine churches, and a waterfront packed with high-rise structures. We encounter the big city’s familiar whirlwind of visual information: street signs, commercial billboards, dense forests of TV antennae, and a jumble of modern architectural styles. The distinctive features of Mediterranean culture, too, become evident here: almost every residential building features generous, sun-drenched balconies, suggesting an easy openness to the environment. Surprisingly, in a city laid out with the automobile in mind, a flourishing public life survives on the streets, making Thessaloniki seem an enormous small town rather than an impersonal metropolis.

With tact and subtlety, Mikael Levin’s photographs of Katrineholm, Cambrai, Erfurt and Thessaloniki reveal the deep-seated strengths and surprising vulnerabilities of urban communities as they struggle to reconcile the inheritance of the past and the insistent demands of the present. His images pass no judgments. Richly descriptive rather than prescriptive, they advance no easy solutions. Instead these photographs enable us to take a crucial first step, one that brings us closer to comprehending the urban processes that slowly unfold, in all their human and historical complexity, before our eyes.

Christopher Phillips is senior editor at Art in America magazine. He teaches at New York University’s Tisch School of Arts and at the School of Visual Arts.

Katrineholm





Katrineholm, founded in 1917, is a town that lives in the present, without a past and without any great interest in its lack of one. Built as a railway junction and designed as a “garden city”, it represents the ideals of the modernist movement and the best aspirations of social planning. In recent years Katrineholm has seen a major influx of immigrants, refugees from conflicts the world over.





Cambrai





Cambrai has a history of over 2,000 years. Yet it too, like Katrineholm, seems to live very much in the present, not having resorted to any self-conscious preoccupations with historical structures. It is a city layered with successive urban designs, rebuilt after war time and again. Today Cambrai searches to redefine itself as a regional center in a part of France that has experienced severe economic decline.





Erfurt





The city of **Erfurt** revels in an idealized past, as expressed in its unique medieval center. Here one finds an untainted Germany, a Germany from before the horrors of its modern era.

Surrounding the historic center, however, this century's expansion festers, presenting all of the social and economic problems carried over from the Communist era to the united Germany of today.





Thessaloniki






Thessaloniki is remarkable for its denial of history, trying as it does to erase 500 years of foreign rule. The city, once a rich multi-ethnic center of trade and culture, was largely destroyed by fire in 1917. Rebuilt starting in the '20s, it was laid out on a modern grid that preserved only its ancient landmarks, and its Ottoman past was completely obliterated. While Thessaloniki has expanded greatly in modern times, it never recovered its wealth or diversity.







Mikael Levin's photographs often focus on questions of identity and memory in the landscape. Projects include *Silent Passage*, a study of an isolated lake in Sweden (published in 1985 by Hudson Hills Press, New York), *Les Quatre Saisons du Territoire* (1987 - 1990), a survey of changing land use in western France, and *Borders* (1993), about the evolving notions of borders in today's Europe. In *War Story* (1995), he retraced his father's 1945 journey through war-torn Europe, photographing the places described by his father as a journalist fifty years earlier (published by Gina Kehayoff Verlag, Munich, 1997). Mikael Levin has exhibited widely and his work is included in many public collections, including, in New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Bibliothèque de nationale de France (Paris) and Moderna Museet (Stockholm). Mikael Levin was born in New York City and lives there today. He has also lived at various times in Israel, in France, and in Sweden.

Common Places looks at how four western European cities express their cultural identities. It is about the origins and history manifested in ordinary urban spaces, and how these manifestations reflect contemporary attitudes toward the past and the future.

Ranging in size from small town to large city, these geographically diverse places are typical urban centers of today. And while they each have a distinctive history, this century's cultural and economic cross-influences have steadily brought them closer to one another.

Your comments on this project are welcome. Please contact Mikael Levin through any of these exhibition sites, or by e-mail at: complaces@aol.com